

Notes on Human Fertility in Central Africa

by Frank Lorimer

1. Preliminary Observations

The relative survival of various societies in Africa was mainly determined by the degree to which the social organization of each society met two critical needs. The first of these needs, was, of course, that of orderly social life, wherein the interests and activities of individuals promote the accepted values of the society - the primary criterion of social organization under any conditions. A second critical need in the African situation, as in Central Asia or the North American plains, was provision for efficient warfare. Each nation was exposed to conquest by other nations and, in turn, each nation had the opportunity of adjusting its resources to its population through military migrations and conquests. Most of the dominant tribes in Africa, especially in East and South Africa, had during the last few centuries moved into the positions that they occupied in the late nineteenth century. There were no effective natural barriers to migration; a stable, sedentary civilization, capable of resisting conquest by invaders, was never established anywhere in Africa south of the Sahara- though some nations may have been in process of achieving such status at the time of their conquest by European powers.

These basic needs, (1) for social order and (2) for military power, were generally met in Africa by types of social organization involving unilateral kinship relations as a primary factor in their social structure. A patrilineal or matrilineal lineage tends to acquire corporate character through the exercise of religious and economic functions. It maintains its unity through successive generations - without the repeated reshuffling of relations that occurs if kinship is reckoned in all directions. A competitive, continuing lineage, reinforced by mystical bonds with ancestral spirits, generates powerful motivation

for extending its life, and increasing its power and prestige, through procreation. The traditional cultures of the dominant African societies, therefore, provide strong motivation for high fertility. Polygyny, which is also widely prevalent in Africa, provides an efficient means, in the case of a patrilineal society, of expanding lineages through the assimilation of women and children acquired by conquest or purchase. The African scene, therefore, promoted increase of tribal populations, and the solution of resultant population pressures through wars and migrations.

Culturally established institutions for the control of fertility, notably approval of infanticide, are found only among the fugitive Bushmen in the vicinity of the Kalahari Desert, and perhaps among displaced Hottentots in the same general region. Two other widespread African practices have sometimes been interpreted as the measures for the control of population; but these interpretations are open to question. The tabu on sexual intercourse with nursing mothers can be interpreted primarily as a measure for promoting the survival of infants. And the limitation of junior male age classes to prescribed modes of incomplete sexual intercourse, as among the Zulu, the Masai, and the Nuer, have purely military significance, as shown by a strong emphasis on procreation in other aspects of the culture of these societies.

Even disorganized African societies tend to retain emotional values that are at least permissive with respect to unlimited procreation.

2. Discussion of Specific Situations

There are marked contrasts in actual levels of fertility among various tribal groups in Africa - in spite of the general prevalence of social structures and cultural motives favorable to high fertility (or, where such positive conditions are no longer in force, a general indifference to size of family). The following items, to be presented at the meeting, give notes

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on some contrasting situations. They are from the preliminary text of a forthcoming report on Culture and Human Fertility (to be published by UNESCO).

Item A. Chapter III, p. 30 (Table XI). For discussion of situation among the matrilineal Ashanti. There will also be brief reference to information on some patrilineal nations (especially Zulu and Masai).

Item B. Chapter VI, pp. 8-9, 15-16. For discussion of situation among Nkundo of central Congo Basin.

Item C. Chapter VI, pp. 24-25. For discussion of situation among Bahutu of Ruanda-Urundi.

Item D. Chapter VI, pp. 17-18. For discussion of situation among Baganda and Bahava.

3. Concluding Observations

1. Sources of emergent interest in control of fertility.
2. Possible significance of emphasis on nuclear family.
3. Recent lines of advance in demography in Africa.